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ABSTRACT

Perspectives on studying abroad in third world countries are presented. Fewer than 5% of Americans who study abroad do so in Third World Countries, although economically and politically the United States and these countries are interdependent. In addition, many employers are seeking individuals with cross-cultural training and sensitivity. The reason relatively few Americans study in Third World countries is linked to the commonalities among European and U.S. education systems and backgrounds, and the fact that living in Third World countries is more problematic and inconvenient. Although there may be unreliable transportation and communications, inadequate standards of food and health care, different educational priorities, and political instability in these countries, there are some ways of dealing with these situations. In addition to selecting countries where the potential for such problems is relatively less, it is advisable to work with well-established institutions. One program approach is to organize the semester's activities and to send an experienced and sensitive academic director with each group. Placing students directly into host country universities has advantages but also lessens control and presents the risk of program disruption in case of local disturbances or university strikes or closings. An important step is predeparture orientation, which introduces the participants, outlines the semester program abroad, and provides general background on the cross-cultural issues. Specific responsibilities of the academic director are noted. (SW)

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STUDY ABROAD in THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES: ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES

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"Are you learning anything?" the American students were asked as they gathered for lunch on the roof terrace of their Kathmandu college headquarters. "Are we learning anything!" they replied; "it's incredible what we're learning!" Their visiting Dean's conversation opener seemed totally inadequate to the profundity of their experience in Nepal and to the ways in which that experience was opening their eyes to new realities, helping them to draw meaning and understanding not only from lectures and books (though that too), but also from observation on the street corner, in the host country family, at festivals, with people from a different cultural background, with different ways of viewing the United States, the world, and even the universe. Their lives had already been changed.

Fewer than five percent of Americans who study abroad do so in Third World countries -- a statistic that is grossly at odds with the current and increasing importance of U.S.-Third World interdependence. Economically, the U.S. is dependent on Third World countries for 30% of all its raw material imports, including all tin and natural rubber and most bauxite and cobalt. Third World countries are the largest and fastest growing customers of U.S. exports, with markets there growing 50% faster than in industrialized countries. Approximately one third of U.S. wheat, rice, and cotton exports, and 40% of manufactured goods exports go to Third World countries, affecting some two million U.S. jobs.

Politically, the fate of the U.S. is also closely linked to that of Third World countries. Unfavorable development prospects in Central America and the Caribbean, for example, have led vast numbers of their peoples to enter the United States, compete for jobs, draw on U.S. social services, and profoundly affect the ethnic and political complexion of our entire country. At a different level, U.S.-Third World political interdependence is clear

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in areas such as the environment, nuclear non-proliferation, use of the global commons (such as the deep seabed), drug control, and international terrorism. These issues transcend national boundaries, and progress for all the world's citizens depends on mutual understanding and cooperation among all nations -- the majority of which, representing the majority of the world's population -- are Third World.

Because the majority of the world's population lives in the Third World, and because these countries are increasingly important on the international scene, it is understandable that NAFSAns should become increasingly concerned with promoting educational opportunities for Americans in Third World nations. In addition to the philosophical rationale for a balanced and comprehensive education that includes Third World issues, pressures have also been growing to prepare students for careers requiring expertise in non-Western culture. The story is commonly told of how the translation of Pepsi-Cola's slogan "Come Alive with Pepsi" nearly appeared in the Chinese edition of Reader's Digest as "Pepsi Brings Your Ancestors Back From The Grave." Many employers are now openly speaking not only of their need for people with cross-cultural training and sensitivity, but also their hiring preference for individuals who have shown initiative and distinguished themselves by doing something different, who have learned the skills of coping in new and challenging situations, and who have thus gained in perspective and maturity.

If all this is true, and if the rewards of studying in Nepal, or Kenya or Mexico, are so great, why are so relatively few Americans studying in Third World countries? With so many study abroad opportunities available in Europe, why are there so few programs in the Third World? The reason is basically two-fold:

First, tradition. The entire post-World War II orientation has been

toward Europe. Most Americans come from European backgrounds, and our education system has been geared to exploring the roots of our shared Western civilization.

Second, complexity. Third World countries, and thus their institutions and people, are more different from us, thus more problematic, often, to deal with. Besides, the telephones may not work as well, and the trains (if any) may not run on time.

The experience of The Experiment in International Living and its School for International Training may be instructive in illustrating how this two-fold inhibition to Third World study can be overcome.

First, traditions may die hard, but a new tradition is emerging. The growth of ethnic awareness in the United States, the influence of more than 80,000 returned Peace Corps volunteers, and through the news media, increasing evidence of U.S.-Third World interdependence have combined to make more students and educators aware of the need to educate Americans on the parts of the world inhabited by the majority of humankind. Reports of distinguished groups such as the Brandt Commission on International Development Issues, and the two Presidential Commissions on World Hunger and Foreign Language and International studies, respectively, have added to this awareness. Indeed, this year, for the first time, more students have enrolled in the School for International Training's College Semester Abroad programs to Third World countries than to the more traditional European countries. While European enrollments are increasing, too, the relative figures suggest increasing Third World interest, particularly in the rural development issues which those programs feature.

The complexities of operating Third World programs remain. Transportation and communications may be unreliable. Standards of accommodation, food, sanitation, and health care may be inadequate. Concepts of time and effi-

ciency may differ from those of the West. Educational priorities and methodologies may vary from those to which Americans are accustomed, and institutional strengths in what are still relatively newly independent nations also vary. Third World countries have a higher tendency to political instability that could affect study abroad programs.

Yet, there are solutions to these problems, or at least ways of grappling with them. The first and most obvious is to select countries where the potential for such problems is relatively less, and then to work with well established institutions where personal relationships have hopefully existed for some time. The School for International Training has benefitted greatly from The Experiment in International Living's worldwide network for logistical and administrative support, setting up homestays, and in some cases academic contacts. In addition, the School works closely in some Third World countries with individual colleges, institutions, and rural development agencies with which it has had some tradition of cooperation over the years. In Sri Lanka, the association is with the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement, a widely reputed development organization based on a combination of Buddhist and Gandhian approaches to community education and uplift. In Kenya, it is with the U.S. Experiment's East African community development program in which Americans and Africans are working together on specific training projects, thus providing opportunities for U.S. students to be participant-observers or serve internships.

Another program safeguard is to organize oneself the semester's activities and to send an experienced and unusually sensitive academic director with each group to ensure both performance and accountability. Placing students directly, and from a distance, into host country universities has some advantages but also lessens control and runs the risk of

of program disruption in case of local disturbances or university strikes or closings. In School for International Training programs, the academic director is responsible for organizing from among local resources, or helping to organize, the entire program, and then for guiding and assisting the students to integrate meaning from the different parts of their experience: the academic seminars, cross-cultural and language training, homestay insights into social life and customs, learning of methods and techniques of field study, independent study projects, and field trips. The academic director is also available as an overall advisor and counselor, since students arriving in Third World countries -- even though they tend to be relatively enterprising personalities in the first place -- are more likely to undergo some form of "culture shock" then those traveling to Western countries.

Working with local cooperating institutions has led, in general, to highly positive program experiences. The best and most highly qualified local academics and other experts, as proven over years of involvement, are made available, while assurance is provided through the key role of the academic director of adherance to the School's own high standards of education. The combination of cultural immersion through the homestay and related experiences, on the one hand, and small U.S. group interaction, on the other, permits an understanding of very different Third World cultures while providing both intellectual and emotional support from a group of peers coping with similar adjustments.

An important first step in preparing students for their Third World experience is the 3-4 day pre-departure orientation held at the School's campus outside Brattleboro, Vermont. Here they become acquainted with one another, with their academic director, and with the more detailed outline

of their semester program abroad. General background on Third World and particularly cross-cultural issues is also given, along with initial exposure to methods and techniques of field study (as opposed to the more familiar library research). Experience has demonstrated the importance of such an orientation to ensure that students are well aware of what is likely to lie ahead and to build the necessary group spirit to cope with any problems. On arrival in the country itself, one tends to be overwhelmed by the exotic sights, sounds, and smells, not to mention by the less comfortable but equally inevitable strains of jet lag, early sense of disorientation, and intestinal adjustments.

While none of these safeguards necessarily ensures a perfect and smooth running Third World study abroad program, collectively they minimize the chances of major problems.

Having said this, it is also worth noting that the point of Third World (or any) study abroad is not, after all, to make the country conform to what is convenient and manageable for U.S. students, but rather to help U.S. students learn about those countries, their progress, and their problems. Even in adversity, in encountering problems, there is learning. As long as these problems, insofar as they affect the study abroad experience, can be kept within control -- those unreliable telephones and trains, the sometimes rigid educational philosophical or frustratingly weak institutions, the slower sense of time and concern for efficiency, the possibilities of sickness or strikes -- they can also provide important learning experiences. Countries and peoples are the way they are because of these factors, and not to experience them -- preferably with an appropriate sense of humor -- is not to know or to understand.

In conclusion, it is to be hoped that through study abroad, students will learn what they as responsible Americans and world citizens can contri-

bute to a more peaceful and prosperous world. The fate of Third World countries and the U.S. role therein is important to that world vision and becoming more so. Not to understand these countries -- to be there and <u>really</u> understand them -- is to be left behind. More NAFSAns should hear that music to the ears: "It's <u>incredible</u> what we're learning!"

John G. Sommer
March, 1983